DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 048 PS 025 447

AUTHOR	Marsh, Dianne G.
TITLE	Voices of Minnesota Youth. A Report of the "Listen '94: Kids Can't Wait" Conference. (St. Paul, Minnesota, March 14, 1994).
INSTITUTION	Minnesota Planning, St. Paul.
SPONS AGENCY	Action for Children Commission, St. Paul, MN.
PUB DATE	Nov 94
NOTE	19p.; For a later report, see PS 025 448.
AVAILABLE FROM	Minnesota Planning, 658 Cedar St., St. Paul, MN 55155; phone: 612-296-4156 (alternate formats available upon request).
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Proceedings (021)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adolescents; Alcohol Abuse; Community Development; Crime; Decision Making; Delinquency Prevention; Disadvantaged Youth; Interpersonal Relationship; Peer Relationship; Pregnancy; Racial Discrimination; Resource Materials; Sexuality; *Social Problems; Substance Abuse; Violence; Well Being; *Youth Problems; Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS	*Adolescent Attitudes; Minnesota; Sexually Transmitted Diseases; Youth Service

ABSTRACT

This report of the "Listen '94: Kids Can't Wait" conference presents the lives and concerns of Minnesota youth as described by the 150 youth who participated in it. The purpose of the conference was to collect ideas about concerns of youth and to seek solutions, encourage youth to take action on issues concerning them, give youth ideas and opportunities for becoming more involved in the political process, and inform officials and other adults that youth want to be a part of the decision-making process. The top concerns expressed by youth at the conference were, in order of priority: (1) alcohol and drugs; (2) violence and crime; (3) discrimination; (4) pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; (5) lack of funding for education; (6) poverty; (7) relationships with family, friends, and community members; (8) school problems ranging from bad teachers and racism to boredom and dropping out; (9) sexual harassment; and (10) lack of student involvement. Each of the top 10 issues identified is presented along with suggested solutions. Also summarized are discussions about what youth like about their communities and what policy-makers should know about youth. (AA)

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VOICES OF MINNESOTA YOUTH

A REPORT OF THE "LISTEN '94: KIDS CAN'T WAIT" CONFERENCE

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Action for Children is a bipartisan, public and private group that stimulates public policy to improve conditions for Minnesota's children and families. Staff assistance is provided by Minnesota Planning.

Voices of Minnesota Youth — Summary of the "Listen '94: Kids Can't Wait Conference" was prepared by Dianne G. Marsh for the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council.

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November 1994

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YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS

The Action for Children Youth Advisory Council 1993-1994 members who organized and planned the "Listen '94: Kids Can't Wait" Conference are listed below. Many of them facilitated small group discussions at the conference.

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SUMMARY

"Listen '94: Kids Can't Wait" was a day of listening to Minnesota youth and their concerns. The conference was convened by the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council on March 14, 1994, at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul.

Designed to give youth a voice in state government, the Action for Children Youth Advisory Council is made up of 27 youth between the ages of 12 and 18 from throughout the state.

The purpose of the "Listen '94" conference was to collect ideas about concerns of youth and seek solutions, encourage youth to take action on issues concerning them, give youth ideas and opportunities for becoming more involved in the political process and inform officials and other adults that youth want to be a part of the decision-making process.

The top 10 concerns expressed by youth at the conference were, in order of priority:

- Alcohol and drugs — youth were especially concerned about drinking and driving
- Violence and crime — the potential fatality of violence and the easy access to knives and guns were particular worries
- Discrimination
- Pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases — of particular concern were teens contracting sexually transmitted diseases and the availability of birth control and condoms to youth
- Lack of funding for education
- Poverty
- Relationships with family, friends and community members
- School problems — concerns ranged from bad teachers and racism to boredom and dropping out
- Sexual harassment
- Student involvement — youth felt that students' voices were not being heard on school boards and councils

This report of the "Listen '94" conference gives insight into the lives and concerns of the state's young people. It is a bird's-eye view of what is happening in the lives of youth who attended the conference.

The 150 people attending "Listen '94" came from the Twin Cities, suburbs, small towns and rural areas. At the conference, they were divided into 16 discussion groups that were facilitated by a team of Youth Advisory Council members and other youth. All of the facilitators were trained by Action for Children staff.

The conference was divided into three parts: the first two were focus group discussions and the last was a panel discussion with invited guests. The first focus group discussion dealt with the problems and issues that youth face in their communities and everyday life. At the end of this discussion, each of the 16 groups generated a list of five concerns that were then tabulated into a list of the top 10 overall concerns. The second focus group dealt with solutions to the problems discussed in the first session.

The views and opinions of the 150 youth who took part in these discussions make up the body of this report. Each of the top 10 issues identified at "Listen '94" is presented along with suggested solutions. Also summarized are discussions about what youth like about their communities and what policy-makers should know about youth.

Action for Children, a nonpartisan group, was created in April 1991 by Governor Arne H. Carlson to study the lives of young Minnesotans, develop a vision of what their lives should be like and make recommendations to help the state achieve that vision. Action for Children was concerned about including young people's voices in its recommendations. Instead of selecting a token youth to sit on its board, it created the Youth Advisory Council to advise it on issues related to children and families.

WHAT YOUTH ARE CONCERNED ABOUT

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

The number one concern of "Listen '94" participants was the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Eleven of the 16 groups cited the use of alcohol and drugs as one of the problems they deal with daily. Many young people believe that the majority of their peers drink alcohol, including young kids, straight-A students and students at alternative schools. A small number of kids do not drink and everybody knows who they are. For the most part, young people drink on the weekends at parties, school dances and other social activities, but some students drink during the day at school. Young people get drunk as a major form of recreation because they are bored and restless. Conference attendees were most concerned about young people drinking and driving.

One group said that adults know about the drinking problems in their communities, but they do not do anything about them.

The most common drug used by young people is marijuana because it is cheap. Other cheap drugs that may be used are LSD and various inhalants. Many of the young people at "Listen '94," even those who live in small towns, said that drugs are easy to get. One group said pot and crack are now available where they were not before.

Many young people felt that drugs lead to involvement in gangs, which lead to violence. They also were concerned about youth using cigarettes and chewing tobacco.

The participants at "Listen '94" believed that peer education is probably the most effective way to teach young people to avoid drinking and driving and other forms of substance abuse. Several groups mentioned that they have DARE or PRIDE programs in their schools, but they did not think the programs start young enough, nor do the groups of students go out often enough to talk to the students younger than them. They felt that high school students should talk to kindergartners because the pressure to drink starts at even that young age. People who talk to younger people about not using drugs or alcohol must not use drugs or alcohol themselves, conference attendees said.

The participants at "Listen '94" advised those younger than them to stay away from drugs and alcohol and not to smoke because "once you start it is hard to stop."

Violence and Crime

The second biggest concern of young people at "Listen '94" was the prevalence of violence and crime in their lives. Violence includes gangs, bomb threats and knives at school, shootings, bullying, abuse by police, arson, school rivalries that result in fights, death threats, racial violence, vandalism and drive-by shootings.

Fighting is worrisome, youth said, because it no longer involves just fists; now knives or guns are used.

Youth from all across Minnesota fear gangs, though only a few at the conference had actual experience with gang violence. Stopping gang violence would go a long way in ridding their communities of violence, youth suggested.

Social views about violence need to change to communicate that violence is wrong; continually showing violence in TV shows and movies sends the message that it is acceptable. Youth believed that respecting people is the key to stopping violence.

Participants were also concerned about the use of guns. Though some youth advocated gun control, others said it will not work because the young people who carry guns are not getting them through legal channels.

Some youth said that harsher sentences are needed to curb violence. At the same time, a concern was expressed that harsher sentencing could have a disproportionate impact on people of color. Participants also felt that if Minnesota enacted the death penalty, people of color would be more likely to be executed than whites.

Discrimination

Several conference attendees reported experiencing or witnessing racism, including race-related violence in school.

"Listen '94" participants said there is not much diversity in small towns and students at homogeneous schools tend to view people of color differently than do students at highly diverse schools. They believed that homogenous schools breed racism. Participants from outside the metropolitan area seemed less accepting of differences in race and sexual preference than youth from the Twin Cities area.

Negative media reporting about Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans contributes to bias toward people of color, youth said.

There was also some discussion about religious discrimination; one youth commented, "Sometimes I don't fit in because my religion differs from that of my schoolmates."

The participants believed that the solution to racism and other forms of discrimination is to educate and inform youth about the diverse world. One young person said multicultural understanding classes "get you to think about other cultures and to see both sides of the story." Youth also felt that the media greatly influences the ideas people have about people of color and that controls are needed on what is broadcast. They would like the accomplishments of all racial and ethnic groups to be acknowledged, for people to stop laughing at racist jokes and to boycott racist movies, books and television shows. One participant said that one race should be promoted — the human race.

Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, the emotional consequences of teen sex and males treating sex as a conquest were cited as problems by participants.

Youth expressed a variety of opinions about sex education — how much there should be and how it should be delivered. Some young people said that facts about sex should not be preached at them and used to try to scare them. They would prefer a more one-on-one approach. Other "Listen '94" participants said that young people should be preached at so they really know what to expect and what the consequences are. Some thought that youth should educate other youth about sex. They also felt that youth listen when sex education does not focus on abstinence.

Youth felt they are receiving two different messages when they are told not to have sex but to practice safe sex if they do. They said it is easier to get someone to use a condom than to not have sex at all. While some participants said that contraceptives should be passed out at school, most would have them distributed at youth community centers or other places where youth frequent.

Participants said that a lot of youth do not use condoms and some girls think that getting pregnant will make their boyfriends stay with them. At most schools, they said, as soon as a girl gets pregnant, she is quickly rushed off to an alternative school so it does not look bad for the school. Some youth felt that this practice was hypocritical and unnecessary.

For most participants, the solution to problems with teen sex and pregnancy lies in educating young people about the facts. Other ideas were classes for teen fathers to teach them to be more responsible, easier accessibility to condoms, more help for pregnant teenagers, and health clinics in school. Some also thought that sex education should include teaching youth to respect their partners and to be in love before they have sex.

Lack of funding for education

The lack of funds in their schools and cuts in programs concern the participants. A couple of groups said that their teachers were not paid well enough; one group thought that the state should invest more in education and effective programs.

Many were worried about college not being affordable. One participant suggested a free college education for students who meet certain standards. Another idea was to tax and solicit support for education from big corporations.

Poverty

Although poverty was listed as one of the top 10 concerns, it was not often discussed as a separate issue in the small groups. Instead, it was one of many concerns that came up as it affected other areas of young people's lives. Youth felt that money determines their social status and that big economic differences between kids puts a lot of pressure on the poor to keep up. Options are few and money is scarce, so kids sometimes join a gang to feel important.

Participants also felt that being poor can contribute to kids having low self-esteem, which hurts their ability to perform well in school. Kids from poor families feel embarrassed because they lack money for such things as lunch and clothes. Youth frustrated by their poverty may commit crimes to lash out or elevate their status among their peers.

Relationships

Although relationships with family, friends and the community were listed as number seven on the top 10 list, they were an underlying theme throughout many discussions.

Youth felt their role in their families ranges from being the maid and the peacemaker to working with the family business. Some youth felt it is hard to live up to their family's high expectations. Oldest children felt they have to keep everything in order and their siblings in line; in a single-parent family, they said, the oldest child often plays the role of mom or dad. However, several groups mentioned that they are too busy to spend time with their families.

Participants also talked about how their friends perceive them. One youth said that friends expect to keep each other from doing stupid things. Several youth said they listen to their friends, while some said their friends view them as a "party starter" or "party animal."

Talk about relationships centered mostly on communities. "Society seems to look down on kids," said one group, "and almost ignores or is against kids." Youth said they are viewed as "walking disturbances" — trouble-makers, thieves, alcoholics and drug users. One group felt that communities fear what trouble youth could get into instead of focusing on the good they could do. Adults think that if youth are having fun, they are horrible, some participants lamented. "Not <u>everybody</u> is a gang member, homeless, racist-bigot," commented one youth.

Among other youth, however, there was a feeling that some people in the community are becoming more accepting and trusting of youth.

When asked who cares about youth in their community, participants named a wide spectrum, including parents, youth organizations, youth leaders, school board members, religious leaders, city council members, churches and the community in general. Several, however, did not think anyone cared about youth — especially not the government; kids have no vote, no money, no rights and no one listens to them.

To improve their relationships with their community, participants suggested that more high school students be available to talk to and be

friends with younger kids. As one young person put it, "kids really do care about other things besides themselves." Students should be counseled on their feelings and peers should work out their mutual problems though mediation. More people need to listen to children, and parents need to be more concerned for their children. Older people should be involved in youth actions.

Youth said relationship problems start at home with the way children are taught. As one young person put it, "the youth who get in trouble are the ones who need love and attention because they aren't getting it from their parents."

School Problems

Among the problems that young people said they were having at school were: limited class choices and after-school programs, bad teachers and curricula, racism, dropping out of or skipping school, boredom and finding time to study.

Youth said teachers do not respect students, care about teaching or give enough attention to students. They expressed some concern about teaching methods saying that teachers do not always realize that everyone learns differently.

Students said that rules are too strict and that adults fear what might be instead of what really is happening. Youth are treated like prisoners in school due to new stricter policies.

Inequalities between athletes and other students are another problem. Too many exceptions are made for athletes, participants said; other students get "burned" because athletes get away with behaviors for which other students would be disciplined.

Suggestions of how to deal with the problems in education ranged from training teachers to better deal with kids, to using outcome based education. School administrators should respect students' privacy; participants derided the use of metal detectors and locker searches. Schools also should look to students as well as teachers to solve problems. Finally,

curriculum should include more African, Asian and Native American achievements.

One group thought that if the educational system were made tougher and more challenging, like the European system, students would want it more.

Participants also recognized parents' responsibility in their child's education. Education starts at home, youth said, and parents need to take their concerns to the school board to help make positive changes.

Sexual Harassment

Youth expressed a general concern about sexual harassment. Unfortunately, youth said, people get used to discriminatory behavior, such as whistles and catcalls. Because the behavior is commonplace, youth learn to "let it go." One youth commented that sexual harassment had been hyped up and turned into an strategy for girls to get revenge on boys. Some participants felt that society needs to recognize that boys are also victims of sexual harassment.

According to participants, kids are worried because they do not really understand the concept and are afraid they will be accused of doing something they did not know was wrong. They wanted young people to be educated about sexual harassment so everyone knows what it is.

Student Involvement

"Listen '94" participants had concerns about student involvement and their representation on school boards. They felt that students' voices are not being heard and that opportunities for student involvement were limited outside the metropolitan area.

While they felt students should be more involved in extracurricular activities, they also said there are not enough activities. Youth are bored in school and in their communities. When young people are bored, they said, they do drugs, drink alcohol, get into fights, vandalize property and

have sex — all of which are among the conference attendees' top 10 concerns.

Youth need a place to hang out with their peers, especially outside the Twin Cities area. Youth said they do not go to the YMCA or the Boys and Girls Clubs because these places are too far away from their neighborhoods and they cost too much. Several groups suggested having youth centers organized by youth that would be free or inexpensive and located in neighborhoods where kids have easy access.

Other suggestions to increase youth involvement were to have a teen congress, youth school boards, a group of youth who work directly with the community mayor and more conferences like "Listen '94."

WHAT YOUTH LIKE ABOUT THEIR COMMUNITIES

Youth like their communities for a variety of reasons. In small towns, young people like that they know everyone in their town, the schools are close, school spirit is good and there is less crime.

Young people in cities like the opportunities available in larger schools, along with a "good mix of people."

In general, young people like communities that offer a lot to do, such as sports, volunteer opportunities, church youth groups, dancing and activities to improve yourself.

WHAT POLICY-MAKERS SHOULD KNOW

The main message "Listen '94" participants wanted to send to policy-makers is that youth have opinions and they would like them to be heard. Some suggestions were that more youth should be on policy-making committees. Some even thought youth should be able to vote, especially concerning issues that directly affect them, such as school funding and education policies. They would also like state representatives to talk to youth and listen to youth instead of misjudging them. "Youth have a lot to offer," one young person said, "but they won't let us."

"Listen '94" was just that — a day of listening. Many of the young people commented that they were glad that someone was actually taking time out to listen to their concerns and what they had to say.

Young Minnesotans talked about what life is like for them, aired their concerns and came up with strategies to address problems. This report will be given to anyone who is interested in hearing the ideas of the average young person in Minnesota. Particularly it will be given to state and local policy-makers, school districts and non-profit organizations targeting youth.

"Listen '94" was an opportunity for young people to discuss the issues that impact their community. The day can easily be summed up in the words of one participant, "I think this was great and I know I will share what I learned with others. Please do this again next year."

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